Modular Model Approach to Technical Writing Instructions – The Structuring Technique Can Best Be Learned from Non-Technical Content

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Consider how to learn how to write a paper. The total writing process involves three element processes: 1 Source material preparation, 2 Structuring, and 3 Writing in a specified language. In this paper we will argue that *key structuring principles such as "three-part structure" are common to technical writings and non-technical writings such as screenplays*. The result has far-reaching consequences: 1. How to structure technical contents can be learned from easy-to-read *non-technical* contents such as screenplays; 2. Structuring skills and language skills can be learned independently. These facts throw considerable light onto the instructional policy redesign for the adjunct model writing class, of which technical writing classes are an example.

§1　Introduction

Consider how to learn how to write a paper. We begin by reviewing the *total* writing process. It involves three element processes:

1. The upstream process: *Source material preparation*. Source material is a collection of logically inter-related data and facts that have been accumulated from a specific research to be put in an organized form or in the form of a *paper*. The quality of the finished product (= the finished paper) primarily depends on the quality of the source material. This step is of highly specialized nature. The working language at this step may be any one.

2. The middle-stream process: *Structuring*. The source material is organized into a definite form, or the *outer* structure (as opposed to the *inner* or *logical* structure) of the paper is determined. Again the working language at this step may be any one.

3. The downstream process: *Writing in a specified language*. The structured material from the last process is expressed in a specified language such as English or Japanese. Only at this step we are required to have proficiency in a specific language.

We will show this in the next section.

It is the second element process that we are mainly concerned with in this paper. We will argue that *key conceptual structuring concepts such as three-part structure are ubiquitous and content-independent*, or *the structuring principle has a thousand faces*, to borrow an expression from the Joseph Campbell' classic "The Hero with a Thousand Faces" [1], in which the author shows among other things that the mythic hero stories in all parts of the world represent journey stories *in a definite common pattern*.

The fact we just stated has far-reaching consequences as we will show in § 3.

§ 2   The Structuring Principle Has a Thousand Faces

Our assertion: The *total* movie production process is by far the most convenient reference process into which simpler processes such as *paper writing* or even *Internet-content production* can be *embedded* or *mapped* for comparison or *benchmarking*. The reason is simply that the movie production process is well-known, well-studied and large enough (and is still evolving).

We will demonstrate some of the benchmark structuring concepts as below, where the screenplay structuring concepts are written to the right of the corresponding concepts in the technical writing:

Abstract ⇔ *Subject* (a simplified story line stated in about 40 words) [4, p.14]

Outline ⇔ *Treatment* (a 4-page outline of the story developed from "Subject") [4, p.2]

Background, *Past Research* ⇔ *Back Story* (describing the actions and background of each character up to the time when they appear in the screenplay. The back story does not appear in the screenplay. If the screenwriter wishes to include it in the body of the screenplay, a back story to the back story is written.) [4, p.96]

Main Theme, Subject of Study ⇔ *Main Character* ("Whose story is it? The main character may be any thing, as "Nashville," capital city of the state of Tennessee is the main character of the movie of the same title. A movie may feature several *Major characters* along with the main character.) [3, p.122]

Three-Part Structure: Introduction, Main Body, Conclusion ⇔ *Three-Part Structure: Set Up* (*Act I*), *Confrontation* (*Act II*), *Resolution* (*Act III*) (This organizational concept also applies to playwrights: See the book by J. Hatcher [8].) [3, p. 9]

Transition [11, Chapter 11] (= Swales' "Thought-Connectives" [12, Section 9.5]) ⇔ *Plot Point* [3, Chapter 9] (These are story-line switching devices.)

§ 3 Conclusion

The ubiquity of the structuring principle stated in the first section and argued in the last section has far-reaching consequences as the following two easy corollaries show:

Corollary 1: The techniques of structuring technical contents can be learned from easy-to-read *non-technical* contents such as screenplays, newspaper editorials, TV documentary programs, or even four-frame cartoons. In other words, a wealth of easy-to-read materials may be used for structuring exercises.

Corollary 2: Structuring and language may be studied independently of each other. Thus, writing teachers may as well concentrate on teaching language skills only, leaving highly content-dependent matters to the content course teachers. From the learner's viewpoint a good language-teaching book such as one by J. Swales [12] written for the students of science or engineering is the kind of book to choose, for instance.

The widely adopted *content-based* or *adjunct* model writing classes are those which are set up adjunct to a set of content courses in a specific area of study [7]. Technical writing classes belong to this model, where the content courses are in science and engineering. Despite its noble intention of integrating language and content, the adjunct model is not an easy model to use. In fact, the adjunct model writing classes are full of operational vagaries as reported in [7] (see especially Chapter 26 by L. Goldstein et. al., 331-346). Technical writing textbooks are often confusing to the learner since they have too many heads to cover from the total writing process and are often too prescriptive to be practical. We offer our *modular model*, so named from the modularity of the three element processes as identified in § 1, as an promising alternate writing class model.

References (Those quoted in the text plus some other helpful ones indicated by "*")

[1] Joseph Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces, Second Edition, Princeton, 1968

*[2] Joel Engel, Screenwriters on Screenwriting, MFJ Books, 1995 ("When I write a screenplay I describe a movie that's already been shot." –Robert Towne, the screenwriter for *Chinatown* , p. 200)

[3] Syd Field, Screenplay, Third Edition, Dell, 1994

[4] ------------, The Screenwriter's Workbook, Dell, 1984

*[5] ------------, The Screenwriter's Problem Solver, Dell, 1998

[6] ------------, Going to the Movies, Dell, 2001

[7] M. Snow and D. Brinton(Editors), The Content-Based Classroom, Longman, 1997 (See especially Chapter 26, L. Goldstein, C. Campbell, and M. Cummings, Smiling through the Turbulence: The Flight Attendant Syndrome and Writing Instructor Status in the Adjunct Model)

[8] Jeffrey Hatcher, The Art & Craft of Playwriting, Story Press, 1996

*[9] Yasuhiko Ikebe, How to Build Up Your English Technical Presentation Skills, Transactions of Human Interface Society, Vol. 3, 27-30, 99-102, 161-166, 2001 (In

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*[10] Viki King, How to Write a Movie in 21 Days, Harper, 1988 ("Write from your heart; Rewrite from your head," p. 6)

[11] G. H. Mills, J. A. Walter, Technical Writing, Fifth Edition (First Edition 1954), Holt,

1986

[12] John Swales, Writing Scientific English, Nelson, 1985 (Japanese translation available)

[13] Christopher Vogler, The Writer's Journey, Second Edition, Michael Wiese, 1998

Screenplays of Special Value:

*[14] *Chinatown*, Faber and Faber, 1974 (The Syd Field's books quoted make frequent reference to this masterpiece screenplay.)

*[15] *The Shawshank Redemption* (The Shooting Script), Newmarket Press, 1996. (The screenwriter Darabont gives a 26-page scene-by-scene insightful account. A 22-page explanation of the actual *storyboading* is also given. This is a real treat.)

*[16] *American Beauty* (The Shooting Script), Newmarket Press, 1999. (The Awards Edition version of the DreamWorks Video, a two-volume set, offers an interesting piece of information on the actual production in the second volume.)

*[17] *A Beautiful Mind* (The Shooting Script), Newmarket Press, 2002. (A biographical movie on the Nobelist mathematician John Nash. The Awards Edition video gives "A behind-the-scenes look into the making of the movie.")